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Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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LEBANON: Syria's Quagmire

Summary

Throughout their nearly nine-year involvement in Lebanon, the Syrians have mediated, threatened, shifted alliances, and used military force to impose temporary cease-fires and preserve a rough balance among the contending factions. Syrian efforts to create a new political order in Lebanon failed, however, and sporadic violence continued throughout the "pax Syriana" between 1976 and 1982. Many events--including murders and ambushes carried out to settle feuds among and within the warring sectarian factions--proved beyond Syria's ability to control. Lebanese leaders failed to carry out necessary political reforms and rebuild national institutions.

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President Assad is unlikely now to achieve any greater success. Israeli troops in the south and US forces off shore set "red lines" on Syrian troop movements, especially in the greater Beirut area. Moderate Shia leaders are not under Syria's control, and Iranian support to Lebanese Shia radicals could disrupt attempts to reach a settlement acceptable to Lebanese Muslims. Druze military victories and Syrian promises of greater Druze autonomy to encourage opposition to President Gemayel probably have diminished this faction's willingness to compromise. Assad faces the prospect of indefinite military involvement in Lebanon.

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Since 1975, the Syrians have intervened in the Lebanese
civil war and successively shifted alliances to prevent any one
faction or sectarian group from achieving dominance.

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From the perspective of Damascus, there is no option to
retaining a sectarian balance in a unified Lebanon. A Christian
Lebanon ultimately would make peace with Israel, further
isolating Syria. A radical Muslim Lebanon might ally itself with
Iran against secular Syria, provide a haven for Assad's
fundamentalist opponents, or encourage Palestinian attacks on
Israel, threatening to draw Syria into another war. Partition
could lead to both outcomes.

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Since the outbreak of civil war, the deadlock in Lebanon has
remained essentially constant. The Christian-dominated
government has insisted that no political reforms are possible
without a stable security situation. The Muslim opposition, on
the other hand, has insisted that there will be no security until
reforms are implemented.

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Damascus initiated a diplomatic effort to break the deadlock
in September 1975 by arranging the first of many Syrian-inspired
cease-fires. On that occasion and since, the Syrians cajoled the
parties into talks that subsequently failed when the participants
refused to deal with one another. New incidents then led to more
rounds of fighting. In December 1975, for example, talks with
Pierre Gemayel in Damascus broke down when four Phalange leaders
were murdered in Christian territory and Maronite militiamen
retaliated by butchering 200 Muslim civilians. In early 1976,
the Syrians thought they had worked out with both sides a
constitutional document setting out reforms, but the Lebanese
leftist opposition sabotaged the agreement.

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When Syrian mediation attempts failed, Damascus relied on
military means to contain the fighting and prevent a total defeat
of one side or the other. In January 1976, the Syrians sent
Palestinian units under their control to stop a Maronite
offensive against the Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims. In
March, Damascus used these units--and Syrian regulars in
Palestinian uniforms--at President Franjiyah's request to stop a
Druze, Muslim, and Palestinian assault on the presidential
palace.

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In June 1976, Syria invaded. By the end of the year, under
an Arab League mandate, Syrian troops acting as the "Arab
Deterrent Force" (ADF) deployed throughout most of Lebanon to put
a lid on the civil war. The principal militias disappeared from
the streets of Beirut, and units of the ADF manned hundreds of
checkpoints throughout the country, except in the south and the
Christian heartland.

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In retrospect, the "pax Syriana" from 1976 to the Israeli invasion in 1982 proved a political failure. Despite the presence of Syrian troops, there were scores of incidents during this period, and various attempts to achieve political reform and institution-building failed.

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Outlook

President Assad appears unlikely to achieve any greater success now. New Israeli and US "red lines" almost certainly place limits on Syria's willingness to deploy its troops forward, especially in the greater Beirut area. Disillusionment with the Syrians--eight years of "peacekeeping" duties have led to rampant corruption among the Syrian forces--has grown among the Lebanese. Military defeats at the hands of the Israelis have diminished the aura of invincibility that assisted the rapid Syrian advance in 1976.

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Christian attitudes now have hardened, while Druze and Shia military victories have diminished their willingness to compromise. Shia Amal leader Nabih Barri maintains contacts with Damascus but appears determined to remain independent. Iranian-supported Shia radicals are likely to oppose Syrian-designed plans to preserve a Christian leadership role in Lebanon. The Druze--encouraged by Damascus to believe they would win greater autonomy--appear even less willing to strike a deal with the Christians.

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At least sporadic violence is likely to continue. Damascus can claim victory in having prevented a Lebanese move to reach a separate peace with Tel Aviv, but the Syrians are no closer to a political resolution favorable to their interests than they were in 1975. Assad has achieved greater control over the Palestinian element in the Lebanese equation, but increased Iranian influence and heightened sectarian polarization appear to cancel out any potential for meaningful progress toward political stability.

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For the near term, Assad has no attractive options. His attempts to impose a solution by military force and political persuasion have failed. Withdrawal would risk renewed civil war and partition. With Israeli troops remaining in southern Lebanon and continued political deadlock, Assad faces the prospect of indefinite military involvement in Lebanon.

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: Syria's Quagmire

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